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OFFICE OF PETITIONS

In re Patent No. 6,923,563
Issue Date: August 2, 2005
Application No. 10/625,760
Filed: July 24, 2003
Attorney Docket No. 1857294

ON PETITION

This is a decision on the petition under 37 CFR 1.378(b), filed November 27, 2009, to accept the unavoidably delayed payment of a maintenance fee for the above-identified patent.

The petition is **DISMISSED**.

The patent issued August 2, 2005. The first (3 ½ year) maintenance fee was due August 2, 2008 and could have been paid from August 2, 2008 thru February 2, 2009 or with a surcharge during the period of February 2, 2009 thru August 2, 2009. Accordingly, the patent expired at midnight August 2, 2009, for failure to submit the first maintenance fee.

A petition to accept the delayed payment of a maintenance fee under 35 USC 41(c) and 37 CFR 1.378(b) must be accompanied by (1) an adequate showing that the delay was unavoidable, since reasonable care was taken to insure that the maintenance fee would be paid timely, (2) payment of the appropriate maintenance fee, unless previously submitted, and (3) payment of the surcharge set forth in 37 CFR 1.20(i)(1). This petition lacks item (1) above.

Petitioner asserts that Patent owner was contacted by the "Patent Center" to make payment for the 3 ½ year maintenance fee. Petitioner also states that believing the "Patent Center" to be legitimate he paid them \$425 and all attempts to contact the Patent Center with regards to the payment of the fee to the USPTO were unsuccessful and thus the reason for the unavoidably delayed payment of the maintenance fee is the failure of the "Patent Center" to submit the Maintenance Fee to the USPTO.

The showing of record is inadequate to establish unavoidable delay within the meaning of 37 CFR 1.378(b)(3).

37 CFR 1.378(b)(3) states that any petition to accept delayed payment of a maintenance fee must include:

"A showing that the delay was unavoidable since reasonable care was taken to ensure that the maintenance fee would be paid timely and that the petition was filed promptly after the patentee was notified of, or otherwise became aware of, the expiration of the patent. The showing must enumerate the steps taken to ensure timely payment of the maintenance fee, the date, and the

manner in which patentee became aware of the expiration of the patent, and the steps taken to file the petition promptly.”

As 35 USC § 41(b) requires the payment of fees at specified intervals to maintain a patent in force, rather than some response to a specific action by the Office under 35 USC § 133, a reasonably prudent person in the exercise of due care and diligence would have taken steps to ensure the timely payment of such maintenance fees. *Ray v. Lehman*, 55 F.3d 606, 609, 34 USPQ2d 1786, 1788 (Fed. Cir. 1995) (quoting *In re Patent No. 4,409,763*, 7 USPQ2d 1798, 1800 (Comm’r Pat. 1988), *aff’d* *dub nom.* That is, an adequate showing that the delay in payment of the maintenance fee at issue was “unavoidable” within the meaning of 35 U.S.C. § 41(c) and 37 CFR 1.378(b)(3) requires a showing of the steps taken by the responsible party to ensure the timely payment of the maintenance fee for this patent. *Id.*

As the patent holder at the time of expiration, it was incumbent on petitioner to have itself docketed this patent for payment of the maintenance fee in a reliable system as would be employed by a prudent and careful person with respect to his most important business, or to have engaged another for that purpose. See *California Medical Products v. Technol Med. Prod.*, 921 F.Supp. 1219, 1259 (D.Del. 1995). Even where another has been relied upon to pay the maintenance fees, such asserted reliance *per se* does not provide a petitioner with a showing of unavoidable delay within the meaning of 37 CFR § 1.378(b) and 35 USC § 41(c). *Id.* Rather, such reliance merely shifts the focus of the inquiry from the petitioner to whether the obligated party acted reasonably and prudently. *Id.* Nevertheless, a petitioner is bound by any errors that may have been committed by the obligated party. *Id.*

However, the record fails to show that adequate steps within the meaning of 37 CFR 1.378(b)(3) were taken by or on behalf of petitioner to schedule or pay the maintenance fee. Petitioner is reminded that 37 CFR 1.378(b)(3) is a validly promulgated regulation, as is the requirement therein for petitioner’s showing of the steps taken to pay the fee. *Ray*, 55 F.3d at 609, 34 USPQ2d at 1788. In the absence of a showing of the steps taken by or on behalf of petitioner, 37 CFR 1.378(b)(3) precludes acceptance of the maintenance fee.

Furthermore, the Letters Patent contains a Maintenance Fee Notice that warns that the patent may be subject to maintenance fees if the application was filed on or after December 12, 1980. Accordingly, a reasonably prudent patentee would have inquired to see if his/her patent was subject to maintenance fees.

The record fails to disclose that the patentee took reasonable steps to ensure timely payment of the maintenance fee. In fact, the record indicates that no steps were taken by patentee to ensure timely payment of the maintenance fee. Since no steps were taken by patentee, 37 CFR 1.378(b) precludes acceptance of the delayed payment of the maintenance fee.

Petitioner is advised, however, that the USPTO is not the forum for resolving a dispute between a patent owner and his representative as to who bore the responsibility for paying a maintenance fee. See *Ray*, 55 F. 3d at 610, 34 USPQ2d at 1789.

The statement of delay is not acceptable. In this regard, petitioner’s attention is directed to 37 CFR 1.33(b), which states.

- (b) Amendments and other papers. Amendments and other papers, except for written assertions pursuant to § 1.27(c)(2)(ii) of this part, filed in the application must be signed by:
 - (1) A registered patent attorney or patent agent of record appointed in compliance with § 1.32(b);

- (2) A registered patent attorney or patent agent not of record who acts in a representative capacity under the provisions of § 1.34;
- (3) An assignee as provided for under §3.71(b) of this chapter; or
- (4) All of the applicants (§ 1.41(b)) for patent, unless there is an assignee of the entire interest and such assignee has taken action in the application in accordance with § 3.71 of this chapter.

An unsigned amendment (or other paper) or one not properly signed by a person having authority to prosecute the application is not entered. This applies, for instance, where the amendment (or other paper) is signed by only one of two applicants and the one signing has not been given a power of attorney by the other applicant.

Therefore, as the petition is not signed by all the inventors and the record herein fails to disclose that petitioner herein (James O. Barber) was ever given a power of attorney to act on behalf of inventor Barbara A. Barber, or that he is an assignee of the entire interest and has complied with the provisions of 37 CFR 3.73(b), the petition is considered to not contain a proper statement of unavoidable delay.

Petitioner will not receive future correspondence related to maintenance fees for the patent unless a "Fee Address" Indication Form (see PTO/SB/47) and Request for Customer Number (see PTO/SB/125) are submitted

If reconsideration of this decision is desired, a petition for reconsideration under 37 CFR 1.378(e) must be filed within **TWO (2) MONTHS** from the mail date of this decision. No extension of this 2-month time limit can be granted under 37 CFR 1.136(a) or (b). Any such petition for reconsideration **must be accompanied by the petition fee of \$400 as set forth in 37 CFR 1.17(f)**. The petition for reconsideration should include an exhaustive attempt to provide the lacking item(s) noted below, since, after a decision on the petition for reconsideration, the Director will undertake no further reconsideration or review of the matter.

Further correspondence with respect to this matter should be addressed as follows:

By Mail: Mail Stop PETITION
 Commissioner for Patents
 Post Office Box 1450
 Alexandria, VA 22313-1450

By Hand: U. S. Patent and Trademark Office
 Customer Service Window, Mail Stop Petitions
 Randolph Building
 401 Dulany Street
 Alexandria, VA 22314

The centralized facsimile number is (571) 273-8300.

Telephone inquiries regarding this decision should be directed to April M. Wise at (571) 272-1642.

/dab/
David Bucci
Petitions Examiner
Office of Petitions

Attachment: blank copy of PTO/SB/66 Petition to Accept Unintentionally Delayed Payment of
Maintenance Fee

cc: JIM BARBER
2245 W. WEBBWOOD ROAD
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